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ABSTRACT

In a futuristic scenario, electronic environments and media might be used to foster a sense of connectivity and intellectual community in a literature seminar. "Cultural Turns" is both the title of the seminar and the justification for it: culture's turn from printed to electronic communication opens up new possibilities for contemporary cultural theory, pedagogy, and intellectual exchange. The course has been designed as an introduction to contemporary theory and pedagogy and focuses on those issues that will be encountered by teachers entering a profession increasingly under pressure to respond to the general public about curricular issues. The seminar proceeds in four main phases: (1) conferring in an open forum using e-mail as a stage on which to perform "conversational jazz"; (2) clustering collaboratively around a problem in a more intense and personally committed conversation; (3) retelling of the problem (for instance, the role of the teacher's authority in the classroom) as a personal narrative; and (4) producing a cycle of correspondence constituting a collection of research notes toward the resolution of the mutually perceived problem. If the wish is for more caring, collaborative, and dialogic educational environments, the available media should be used to construct the kind of virtual classrooms that are necessary. (SAM)

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Professing Literature in 2015

> ... there is a discernible longing for intellectual community. (TTC 66)
>
> That the teaching of literature is a collective enterprise may seem too obvious a point to need stating, but it is easily overlooked. (FLT 255)
>
> One of the oddest things about the university is that it calls itself a "community of scholars," yet organizes itself in a way that conceals the intellectual links of that community from those who don't already see them. I trace this oddity to what I call the course fetish, The assumption that the natural unit of instruction is the autonomous course, one not in direct dialogue with other courses. (*Chronicle*, 2/13/91, A48.)
>
> Yet it is the individual classroom we have tended to focus on in educational reform discussions, a fact that our very use of the expression "the classroom" betrays. (TTC 57)

If you were to ask us: is there a classroom in this text? we would answer "no, not really" Then, of course, the next question to arise would likely be: where then does the teacher stand? And our answer is that the teachers in this text take stands at whatever positions they occupy which depends upon the conversation in which they are engaged. And, if you were to ask, how many teachers are there in this text, we would have to say, at least twenty-five, four of whom are in this room. In short, just as the reader constitutes the text, in AU, the students constitute the teachers and hence the class. By leaving the

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walled in classrooms for electronic forums, a tele-seminar in AU is designed to respond to the lack of connectivity in our current curricula which Gerald Graff so aptly analyzes in his work. Today, we wish to speak to you about the potential implications of tele-seminars for the future of education. We believe that they can (1) relieve us of the space-time constraints which hamper our endeavors, (2) remove the authoritarianism of master teacher/student apprentice, (3) collapse the distinctions between studying, teaching and research in cultural studies and thereby (4) dramatically increase the "connectivity" of our work. Lest you think that we are speaking about some distant future, we intend here to describe only what we are actually doing in our current tele-seminar.

Fittingly, our tele-seminar begins with the problematic which Graff's most recent book addresses: the culture wars. The seminar is called "Cultural Turns: Problems in the Profession." The notable feature of this course is that, in our efforts to use available telecommunications systems to link my seminar at IUP with a similar seminar taught by Jim at Miami University of Ohio we broke out of the "patterned isolation" of individual classrooms we normally endure. Students at both schools have been "connecting" with each other on a daily basis through Telnet and a Vax Notes Conference program on the IUP Vax which Chip just demonstrated. As in some of our earlier experiments with electronic forms of collaboration, this seminar has been exploring the uses of the virtual classroom in promoting various kinds of collaboration over long distances. From our point of view, **collaboration is a strong form of connectivity.**

Electronic environments foster connectivity. However, the very reasons why electronic environments provide ideal contexts for collaboration and connectivity are the same reasons which explain why they blur hierarchical boundaries. Persons

participate as relatively disembodied "voices" in electronic conversations. They also acquire personae which are distinct from their "real life" personae. At the same time, they acquire different (often more equitable) status than they enjoy in "real life" situations. For example, unlike the real life classroom in which the teacher stands on a "stage" and performs to a captive audience who are punished if they do not attend, the electronic environment is more like a cocktail party--you speak to one person, overhear what others are saying, miss some things altogether and generally engage many persons in many differing conversations at different intervals of time. Electronic conversations are so wide-ranging that no one person is master of all relevant information. Those officially designated teachers cannot know all the innuendoes of the technology and often have to seek the advice of those who have been officially designated "students." Chip can give you witness to this phenomenon. This brings us to the problem which we are trying to address in the Cycles project: how do you take a random, free-floating, dynamic, irrepressible conversation and allow it to become productive research without introducing some form of police state?

It is obvious that you can take the traditional, print-oriented disciplinary classroom and transplant it into the electronic environment, but then you bring along all of its problems--the foremost being its lack of connectivity. In this talk we present our ongoing answering of the question we pose. Not by way of a theory. Rather in a more narrative mode. We simply describe what we are doing and trust that you will be able to discern how it is a response to the problem we are addressing. For now, we will briefly tell you about our tele-seminar:

"Cultural Turns" is both the title of our seminar and its justification. That is, our culture's turn from printed to electronic communication is both the subject of our investigation

and our motive for using tele-communication in our investigation. In general, the course has been designed as an introduction to contemporary theory and pedagogy with a focus on those issues that will be encountered by "teachers" entering a profession increasingly under pressure to respond to the general public about curricular issues.

We envision the "Cultural Turns" seminar as a quilt woven from four discernible fabrics of discursive experience:

1) conferring in an open forum (the conversational jazz we have already spoken about)

2) clustering collaboratively around a problem (a more intense and personally committed conversation)

3) re-telling of the problem as a narrative (the moment where the intensity involves requires more of a personal dimension & fewer ideas)

4) a "cycle" of correspondence constituting a collection of research notes toward the resolution of the mutually perceived problem.

We will expand briefly on each of these AS IF THEY WERE phases. But it is important to keep in mind that while we present these phases in a linear, sequential way, it is not at all necessary that this be the case. Participants can, and often do, begin work in any of the first three phases. But since class interactions begin so ostensibly in the first, open forum phase, we present them in the order just mentioned.

1) Participation in the Cultural Turns seminar usually begins with online contributions to the open forum of the Alpha Conference. As Chip has demonstrated, the Notes program invites participants to register their replies to posted topics, issues, or assigned readings. There are several immediate advantages to this kind of electronic "response statement." For one thing,

participants can contribute to the open forum at any time and as often as they like. Whereas in a classroom, everyone must face "front and center" and listen to the same discussion at the same time, in the online forum, multiple conversations can be carried on with different groups of people in ways that would simply be impossible within an ordinary seminar room. In short, since we are not dependent on class meetings or the "formal" discussions which usually take place in a traditional seminar, we enjoy a different and more relaxed sense of time and even space. In fact, Jim's seminar at Miami meets in real life only over coffee on Wednesday mornings, and my seminar at IUP has now decided to gather for face to face conservation in the back room of a local bar. Our "meetings" are devoted more to business and procedural issues, and, more importantly, to socializing--a vital phase of "getting to know each other" which is, professionally speaking at least, only permissible outside the class hours of a traditional seminar. This open-ended structure in a seminar may disturb some of you in the audience who honor a disciplined form of training. But we feel that to construe this type of "open forum" as the likely starting point of a tele-seminar has at least two very significant effects: (a) it allows various persons in the group to discover their own positions in their own voices rather than mimicking the authoritative voice of the "teacher" and (b) it breaks through the illusion that there is some sort of unilateral cognitive vision, some distinct and coherent body of knowledge, some homogenous attitude, some unified field theory, in short, some disciplinary standard through which these problems are understood by all duly accredited professors of literature. In other words, it acknowledges the need to build an intellectual community in order to be in one. We mistrust the notion that many intellectual communities already exist in the academy merely awaiting more subscribers or responses to calls for papers.

In general, the open forum with which we typically begin

encourages the random, ad hoc, spontaneous "response" phase of addressing the issues upon which the seminar is organized, in our case--the cultural wars. The interactive, ongoing discussion of such issues allows participants to express their feelings and thoughts at any time and to get immediate feedback when it provokes others to respond. It allows all of us to get a sense of the variety and differences in our perceptions. It is also a chance to vent dissatisfaction with authority [including ours]. In many instances these conversations are valuable precisely because they are "unproductive," that is, because they are unencumbered by disciplinary constraints. The need to explore the possibility of having taken a position makes the subsequent research meaningful not the fact that others already have positions on it.

Moreover, the electronic environment allows for a variety of different kinds of work and interaction. Participants can respond immediately, online, as a reply in any given topic almost like picking up the telephone after you've listened to your answering machine to respond to the caller. But it is also possible to work off-line in a word processor, and then upload and include this work in a reply which is more like writing a long letter about an important issue to a colleague. These easily lead to extended and revised replies, and, indeed, some of these entries can turn into drafts of papers. This is true not only for the students but also for us, the alleged teachers. We co-authored a lengthy piece called "A Prolegomenon on Protocols for the Notes Conference," which we entered into the initial open forum of the Alpha Conference. In the old days it might have been a lecture, but in this context it was another item of correspondence in a list which we unhappily discovered later that not everyone had bothered to read. Keeping "phones and letters" in mind, consider what we are doing as a written telephone conversation. It is hard to imagine such a phenomenon. Words in

conversation have minute life-cycles. But, notes on the VAX have both the immediacy of a conversation and the duration of a letter. This means that it is possible, for example, to download a particularly provocative response, pull it up into word perfect, write replies directly into the text of one's colleague, and re-enter the revised text back into the notes conference as a new reply. These in-depth interactions are rarely possible in a classroom discussion.

2) The second phase begins when several correspondents recognize that they are mutually interested in a particular problem and that their discussion has begun to "cluster" around it. When several individuals have shared interests and begin to respond to each other, often clarifying their points or positions, adding new insights, they develop a clearer sense of the topic or problem they are investigating. Clustering often suggests new directions for research as issues are refined. After several exchanges, some issues appear to deserve further investigation. When this happens, a work space needs to be found outside the original forum so that the group may develop their re-SEARCH. The discovery of one's commitment to a particular re-search is the heart of a cycle. We contrast this to the more traditional forms of finding research topics--which is often expressed as looking for something "new" and usually is qualified by the clause: which can be published.

Also, and this is a crucial point, the clustering that often takes place does so not just out of a set of shared ideas, but because of growing personal relationships. Groups of people come to enjoy talking with each other, enjoy spending time with each other, enjoy caring for each other's similar concerns. Although caring is dis-regarded in disciplinary research, in the post-disciplinary environment of Cycles, we encourage groups to form because they care, because they are involved, because they

are deeply interested and thus incapable of sustained detachment.

We have called the formation of such groups based on mutual care about painful problems or joyful experiences "Cycles" because they often grow out of cycles of personal correspondence aimed at agreeing to agree rather than at refuting each other.

When we speak of efforts to agree, we are not speaking merely of attempts to persuade each other in argumentative forms. We certainly do not discourage this but we ask for agreement at another level of response--experiential. We are wary of conceptual agreement. There is a lot of "slippage" in concepts these days and a lot of "deferral."

3) The third phase shifts the collaborative focus of a group project from the abstract discussion of ideas and concepts to the more experiential dimension of the personal narrative. The purpose of this phase is to imaginatively re-experience the pains and joys one hopes to make understandable, and for this, narratives are required, and personal anecdotes are often the best place to start. In other words, after debating, discussing, and defining one's interests or problems in phase two, we have found it very helpful to turn out of the analytical and argumentative mode in which the discipline trains us and turn to personal narratives and anecdotes. In particular, one can begin to tie one's research and investigation to one's personal life by writing narratives revealing one's personal relation to the problems raised in the earlier discussions. For example, many of us can tell quite revealing, moving, and informative stories about painful or joyful experiences bearing directly on the theoretical or practical problem being discussed. A topic like the role of a teacher's authority can gain a remarkable immediacy when it appears in a personal narrative. Indeed, in an earlier class, one member offered a fictionalized narrative, called "Barbara's story," that proved to be an extremely provocative and

moving account of real problems that called for resolutions and actions. As Bill will relate from his own experience in a cycle, at some point in an ongoing discussion, personal narratives can be a powerful resource to give an abstract problem a concrete representation which furthers reflection and theorizing toward action. If one is inquiring into "problems in the profession," one of the best places to start is with participants' experiences of the problem, that is, THEIR OWN CLASSROOMS. Indeed, our Cycles conference now has spaces for both narrative accounts of participants own experiences of working in the Notes environment, and additional space for responses to those narratives.

4) Our end is our beginning so to speak. We began by locating problems. We were persistent in trying to see if we were actually talking about the same problems and not just using the same concepts. So, it should surprise no one that our last "phase" tries to DO something about the problems that bother us.

The final "phase" of a Cycles project culminates in appropriate actions aimed at resolving the problems addressed by the group. This can, and has, taken many different directions. Bill will describe some of his own experiences with such a Cycle. As Chip pointed out, the "discursive action" cycle has thus far articulated specific goals for a publication project. Others aim at contributions to our "HistModCrit" database, and others at development of specific kinds of courseware or other classroom innovations.

In our minds the significance of this phase should not be underestimated. So much of the educational life of both students and faculty has been organized around the familiar banking model of the transmission of knowledge. Consequently, there is a tremendous institutional inertia that draws all of us into acquiescence and passivity in the face of the vast amount of

material that must be "covered" in any given course. It is only too easy to lose sight of the possibilities of educational work leading to taking significant action to ameliorate the institution or culture we have been trained to critique.

At the outset of this talk, we said that Cycles has four important consequences: it (1) relieves us of the space-time constraints which hamper our endeavors, (2) removes the authoritarianism of master teacher/student apprentice, (3) collapses the distinctions between studying, teaching and research in cultural studies and THEREBY (4) dramatically increases the "connectivity" of our work.

Gerald Graff has offered a critique of the problems of the "field coverage" model of the modern university and the consequent "patterned isolation" from which most of us suffer. He has offered us, as well, some version of what a postmodern university might look like. While we have amended his version of teaching the conflicts to include focus on concurrences, without going into the details of these emendations, it is worth noting that the four main points of Graff's recommendations seem quite analogous to the four phases of our course as we have just described it. Jim has elsewhere delineated the points of congruence in our views which can only be summarized here: Graff's basic argument has been that if we can break out of our self-imposed isolationism and "connect" with students, we can "restore" our "transformative" cultural role (OVOR). His vision of a new university features:

(1) a learning community in which
(2) students collaborate with their teachers
(3) on cultural texts
(4) to resolve "real-time" problems.

It strikes us that these goals seem quite compatible with our work in Alpha U. One of the real-time problems we all face is that unless we design and implement our own educational environments in cyberspace, then we can be pretty sure that others will design and program it for us. If, that is, we wish to design more caring, collaborative, and dialogical educational environments, then we had better begin the ongoing, experimental work of constructing the kind of virtual classrooms we wish to inhabit. Alpha U is based on the premise that we can't expect technological and business ventures to do that for us. The only thing we can be sure of is that they are certainly trying to do it for us.